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**‘My mother, drunk or sober’: G. K. Chesterton and patriotic anti-imperialism<sup>\*</sup>**

**Anna Vaninskaya<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup>King’s College, Cambridge CB2 1ST, United Kingdom

**Abstract**

In the Edwardian period, the essays, novels, and criticism of G. K. Chesterton gave voice to a unique but emblematic form of patriotic anti-imperialism. The article places his views in the context of the Liberal Little Englander reaction to the Boer War, and offers two comparative case studies. The first focuses on Chesterton's inheritance of the late-Victorian anti-imperialist rhetoric of William Morris; the second assesses his fraught relationship with internationalism, as represented in the writings of Morris's political collaborator, E. B. Bax. Chesterton's radical populist patriotism, it turns out, had more in common with contemporary socialist ideologies than the currently prevailing view of its parochialism would allow.

**Keywords:** Chesterton; Morris; Bax; Patriotism; Imperialism; Socialism; Internationalism; Little England

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<sup>\*</sup> E-mail address: [av323@cam.ac.uk](mailto:av323@cam.ac.uk) I am grateful to Peter Mandler, Julia Stapleton, and Tom Deveson for their input.

Like many of G. K. Chesterton's memorable quotes, 'my mother, drunk or sober' is still alive in the minds of the people, invoked in numerous blogs by opponents of the Iraq war, and featuring with respectable frequency in online lists of quotations. Though Chesterton's writing is little known today, except among those interested in Catholicism or detective fiction, many of his paradoxical witticisms have attained proverbial status, and this particular sound bite probably owes its second wind to George Orwell, who referred to it in 1943: 'G. K. Chesterton, who courageously opposed the Boer War ... once remarked that "My country, right or wrong" was on the same moral level as "My mother, drunk or sober".'<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, a reader is most likely to encounter the expression in Orwell's collected essays and journalism, rather than in the original Chesterton article of 1901. The article in question, called 'A Defence of Patriotism,' was published in the pro-Boer 'romantic Radical' (as Chesterton himself dubbed it) weekly paper The Speaker, edited by J. L. Hammond – later of Village Labourer fame. It was reprinted in Chesterton's first essay collection, The Defendant.<sup>2</sup> The title was prophetic: Chesterton's entire life work -- whether it took the form of fiction, poetry, literary criticism, or ephemeral journalism -- may be described as a defence of patriotism. But patriotism in what sense? Orwell, who inherited Chesterton's capacious cloak as champion of the so-called English common man,<sup>3</sup> defined it during his Lion and Unicorn phase as a 'devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force upon other people. Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally.'<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the contrast between defence and expansion, between the small concentrated patria and the loose extensive empire, is at the

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, 'As I Please,' in George Orwell: The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, vol. 3 (1968; repr., Boston: Nonpareil Books, 2000), 65.

<sup>2</sup> G. K. Chesterton, Autobiography (1936; repr., London: Arrow Books, 1959), 108. Hereafter abbreviated A and cited parenthetically by page number. G. K. Chesterton, 'A Defence of Patriotism,' in The Defendant (1901; repr., London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1914), 124-31; J. L. and B. Hammond, The Village Labourer, 1760-1832 (London, 1911).

<sup>3</sup> The place of women in Chesterton's and Orwell's writing would require a separate treatment.

<sup>4</sup> George Orwell, 'Notes on Nationalism,' in Orwell and Angus, George Orwell 3: 362.

heart of Chesterton's writing. 'Patriotism and Imperialism,' he said in his Autobiography, are 'opposite things' (A, 119). Of course, at that particular moment in English history, as many contemporary observers remarked, patriotism and imperialism came as close as they ever did to meaning the same thing. As one such observer, the socialist Ernest Belfort Bax, put it: 'patriotism' is the 'counterpart in the sphere of morals' of 'that accursed thing called Imperialism, the latest and vilest monster born of the capitalist world.'<sup>5</sup> 'The term "patriotism" in the present day, for the "average man," implies imperialism or jingoism.'<sup>6</sup> Why, then, did Chesterton insist on juxtaposing the two? And how did his writing fit into the wider political debates of the period? By comparing Chesterton's views with those of two other men of letters who occupied the opposite end of the political spectrum: the author and socialist pioneer William Morris and the Marxist historian and philosopher E. B. Bax, this article will trace the implications of Chesterton's patriotic anti-imperialism.<sup>7</sup> Chesterton may be most famous now for his Father Brown mysteries, Morris for his Pre-Raphaelite poetry and socialist utopia News From Nowhere, and Bax not at all except among labour historians, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century all three were integral figures in a cultural milieu which embraced creative writers and non-literary intellectuals alike. Like Shaw, Wells, or Arnold Bennett, all three were journalists with hundreds of articles to their names, and it is in their capacity as public intellectuals, as well as members of the Victorian and Edwardian literary class, that they will be considered here.

## **I. Little Englandism**

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<sup>5</sup> E. B. Bax, 'Internationalism and Bourgeois Foreign Politics,' Justice, June 6, 1908, 6.

<sup>6</sup> E. B. Bax, 'Patriotism v. Socialism,' Justice, September 9, 1911, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Most critical considerations of Chesterton have something to say about his patriotism, but see in particular Margaret Canovan, chapters two and four, in G. K. Chesterton: Radical Populist (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), and for a more recent treatment Julia Stapleton, 'The England of G. K. Chesterton,' The Chesterton Review 32.3-4 (Fall-Winter 2006): 339-55.

Debates about the meanings and interrelations of patriotism, imperialism, nationalism, internationalism, and other related isms in the Edwardian period and in modern English culture generally have been the subject of extensive historiographical enquiry,<sup>8</sup> while in literary criticism, the concept of 'Englishness' and the connections between fiction and imperialism have received most attention.<sup>9</sup> But the literature of patriotic anti-imperialism has been given short shrift, most likely because it tended to the polemical and topical rather than the strictly literary. It did not generate any masterpieces or popular best-sellers, it did not rank among its practitioners authors as critically fashionable (or as open to postcolonial analysis) as Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, Olive Schreiner, or H. Rider Haggard, but in historical terms it was an important and well-publicised, though minority, phenomenon.<sup>10</sup>

Since the nineteenth century, 'Little Englander' had been a term reserved for those who opposed the extension of the British Empire. The biggest enemy of Little England was

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<sup>8</sup> Recent academic works (there are also many popular ones by the likes of Jeremy Paxman, Roger Scruton, and Peter Ackroyd) on English national identity include Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002); see also his earlier edited collection with Philip Dodd, eds., *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1986); Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003); Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (London: Yale Univ. Press, 2006). For patriotism see Raphael Samuel, ed., *Patriotism: the Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, 3 vols. (London: Routledge, 1989); J. H. Grainger, *Patriotisms: Britain 1900-1939* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); and Paul Readman's articles, especially 'The Place of the Past in English Culture c. 1890-1914,' *Past and Present* 186 (February 2005): 147-99 on local patriotism, Little Englandism, and the uses of history in the formation of an insular, rather than imperial national identity. Imperial propaganda has been studied at length by John MacKenzie and J. A. Mangan and their followers, and in a revisionist vein by Bernard Porter in *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Some recent books include David Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness' in Modern Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993); Roger Ebbatson, *An Imaginary England: Nation, Landscape and Literature, 1840-1920* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Paul Peppis, *Literature, Politics, and the English Avant-Garde: Nation and Empire, 1901-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000); Simon Dentith, *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006); Laura Chrisman, *Rereading the Imperial Romance* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000); as well as the older works of Martin Green, Patrick Brantlinger, Jeffrey Richards, and Joseph Bristow. There are also studies of the Boer War in relation to literature, such as Steve Attridge, *Nationalism, Imperialism and Identity in Late Victorian Culture: Civil and Military Worlds* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and Paula Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire: Public Discourse and the Boer War* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), and numerous postcolonial studies of individual authors like Conrad, Haggard, Schreiner, and Kipling.

<sup>10</sup> For left-wing patriotic anti-imperialism see Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881-1924* (Woodbridge: Royal Historical Society/Boydell Press, 1998); Bernard Porter, *Critics of Empire: British Radical Attitudes to Colonialism in Africa, 1895-1914* (London: Macmillan, 1968); and (especially on H. M. Hyndman) Gregory Claeys, 'The "Left" and the Critique of Empire c. 1865-1900: Three Roots of Humanitarian Foreign Policy,' in *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Duncan Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 239-66.

Greater Britain, and the South African War was a symbolic moment, the ‘great crisis in the struggle between Imperialism and Nationalism,’ as J. L. Hammond phrased it in England: A Nation, Being the Papers of the Patriots’ Club.<sup>11</sup> That volume opened with a representative Chesterton essay, ‘The Patriotic Idea,’ which contained most of the motifs that would come to define his writing, as well as the thematic core of his first novel, published the same year (1904) -- The Napoleon of Notting Hill. ‘It is perfectly evident,’ Chesterton wrote, ‘that it is impossible to have an Imperial patriotism; that is to say, it is impossible to have towards a sprawling and indeterminate collection of peoples ... precisely that sentiment which is evoked in man ... by the contemplation of the peculiar customs of his ancestors and the peculiar land of his birth.’<sup>12</sup> Humanist internationalism, although it was the main recognised enemy of imperialism, was rejected on the same grounds; in fact, to trace all of Chesterton’s fulminations against the former would take another article. ‘A healthy man does not demand cosmopolitanism, and does not demand empire. He demands ... Nationalism. That is to say ... a particular relation to some homogenous community of manageable and imaginable size, large enough to inspire his reverence by its hold on history, small enough to inspire his affection by its hold on himself.’<sup>13</sup> ‘We must at all costs get back’ from ‘world-politics’ to ‘smaller political entities.’<sup>14</sup> But smallness and exclusivity did not imply xenophobia: patriotisms, precisely because they were equal and independent, had to respect each other. No nation could presume to export its political institutions, which had to be a ‘growth of the soil,’ and that is why the ‘extension of Anglo-Saxon civilization which is the essential of current Imperialism’ was completely deplorable.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> J. L. Hammond, ‘The Case of South Africa,’ in England: A Nation, Being the Papers of the Patriots’ Club, ed. Lucian Oldershaw (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1904), 183.

<sup>12</sup> G. K. Chesterton, ‘The Patriotic Idea,’ in Oldershaw, England: A Nation 14.

<sup>13</sup> Chesterton, ‘The Patriotic Idea,’ 19. Cf. Benedict Anderson’s definition of the imagined community.

<sup>14</sup> Chesterton, ‘The Patriotic Idea,’ 40.

<sup>15</sup> Chesterton, ‘The Patriotic Idea,’ 35, 34.

The Boer War had aroused opposition from internationalists -- both socialist and Liberal -- and from champions of an insular Englishness -- both radical and conservative. In the early years of the twentieth century Chesterton still considered himself a Liberal, and had a close working relationship with those social critics -- like C. F. G. Masterman and J. A. Hobson -- who in standard accounts of the period figure as representatives of Little England.<sup>16</sup> But the views expressed in Chesterton's opening essay were highly idiosyncratic, and by no means typical of mainstream Liberal Little Englandism. He never altogether joined the camp: listening to Hobson speaking against imperialism, Chesterton later confessed, almost turned him in favour of it (A, 248). He could not stand pacifists (A, 105); he had no time for Cobdenite internationalism; he lacked the New Liberals' aversion to the 'primitive divisions' of nationality; and his patriotism was not 'strained' or 'diluted,' not suspicious of flag and 'arms-bearing man,'<sup>17</sup> but on the contrary, bright and vivid and in love with colourful banners and sharp swords.<sup>18</sup> It made for exciting plots, not tedious disquisitions. 'Patriotism is not mere citizenship,' Chesterton declared in A Short History of England, 'patriotism is for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health ... it is not to travel in the ship of state as a passenger, but if need be to go down with the ship.'<sup>19</sup> The Little Englanders, according to J. H. Grainger, 'did not clamour for the defence of fort, wall or boundary' -- Chesterton did. 'Solidarity and sacrifice were not their words' -- they were Chesterton's. 'As Liberals they were ranged against ... active fraternity' -- Chesterton celebrated it.<sup>20</sup> Of course, there was one major exception to their lukewarm attitude to the nation, which showed them to be truer heirs of Victorian Liberalism than the imperialist wing

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<sup>16</sup> See especially Grainger's chapter nine on 'Little England.'

<sup>17</sup> Grainger, Patriotisms 157, 160, 164.

<sup>18</sup> On Chesterton's opposition to New Liberalism see Canovan, G. K. Chesterton chapter three, and on his problematic glorification of fighting, chapter four.

<sup>19</sup> G. K. Chesterton, A Short History of England (1917; repr., London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), 115. See Julia Stapleton, 'Citizenship versus Patriotism in Twentieth-Century England,' The Historical Journal 48.1 (2005): 151-78.

<sup>20</sup> Grainger, Patriotisms 166.

of the party: the plight of the oppressed small nationality. Little Englanders may or may not have been fervent patriots of England, but they were always and everywhere (at least in Europe) in sympathy with any small nationality that was attempting to achieve its independence, or to protect itself against the encroachments of greater powers. They espoused, effectively, a variety of the romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century, adapted for the new era of international finance. If in Gladstone's time they had rooted for the Greeks, Poles, Montenegrins, Bulgarians, Armenians, and the Irish, in the new century they supported the Boers, Macedonians, Finns, and of course, the Poles and the Irish.

In this respect Chesterton was a full-blooded Little Englander. He would reassert his belief 'in the victory of small nationalities' in the most unlikely of places -- when discussing Jane Austen for instance<sup>21</sup> -- and with regard to the most unusual examples. In his trademark paradoxical style, he inverted the received Victorian notion of 'the birth of the British Empire' in Elizabethan England: 'What came then was not Imperialism, it was Anti-Imperialism.' The most heroic moment in English history was the defeat of the Spanish Armada, but not for any of the obvious reasons. The English of the sixteenth century, it turned out, achieved 'the story of a small nationality.' They fought the cosmopolitan imperialism of Spain just as the 'provincial' Boers had fought the cosmopolitan imperialism of Great Britain: 'we may never be so small or so great again.'<sup>22</sup> But if England's patriotic glory was in the past, other nationalities were battling for self-determination in the here and now, and Chesterton would rarely forego a reference to the Irish or Polish independence movements. 'I have always felt it the first duty of a real English patriot to sympathise with the passionate patriotism of Ireland,' he wrote (A, 119). The hero of his satiric dystopian comedy The Flying Inn is not only an Irishman, but a Greek freedom fighter by adoption, who takes as his own the cause of a fictional tiny Greek principality in its struggle against the

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<sup>21</sup> G. K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature (1913; repr., London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), 47.

<sup>22</sup> Chesterton, A Short History, 155-7.



military might of Turkey and the complicity of the European elites.<sup>23</sup> Though finally defeated in the Mediterranean, Patrick Dalroy comes to England, and helps to rescue that country from its own misguided government. The journey from foreign to domestic is crucial (and echoes the opening of The Napoleon of Notting Hill, of which more later). For that was, of course, the other face of Little Englandism, especially in its Chestertonian guise. The opposition between aggressor and victim abroad was analogous to that between government and governed at home: the capitalist ‘plutocrats,’ the financial and state ‘oligarchy,’ squared off against the downtrodden but wholesome common people. Monopolism and aggressive ‘vainglory’ sprang, ultimately, from the same root.<sup>24</sup>

It has been said that Hobson believed imperialism to be the antithesis of democracy, oppressing not just ‘people in foreign lands’ but the ‘free-born Englishman’ at home, and fostering unaccountability and militarism.<sup>25</sup> The view was not unique to him: it seems to have been held by most anti-imperialists. As E. Green and M. Taylor maintain, ‘although the subject matter of Little Englander discourse [was] imperial or foreign policy, the basic root of Little England thinking [was] concern for the ramifications of this kind of policy within the domestic sphere,’ its incompatibility with social reform.<sup>26</sup> In Chesterton’s mind, the modern English were a small embattled nationality like any other, except that their oppressors were of the same blood: the Spanish Armada had been internalised. His Short History of England is one long tale of the disenfranchisement of the common people by the ruling oligarchy, the suppression of every popular revolt, the destruction of the communal rights and liberties of the Middle Ages beginning with the Reformation and reaching a high point with the New Poor Law. Although these repressions paled next to the ‘religious and racial insanity,’ the ‘terrorism’ the British governing class inflicted on the Irish during the long history of

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<sup>23</sup> G. K. Chesterton, The Flying Inn (New York: John Lane Company, 1914).

<sup>24</sup> Grainger, Patriotisms 151.

<sup>25</sup> E. Green and M. Taylor, ‘Further Thoughts on Little Englandism,’ in Samuel, Patriotism 1: 107.

<sup>26</sup> Green and Taylor, ‘Further Thoughts’ 1: 108.

occupation,<sup>27</sup> the English too had a right to fight for self-determination – not now against some foreign foe, but against their own rulers, who also denied that right to the inhabitants of other lands. The villains of the twentieth century were the ‘cosmopolitan financiers’ who ravaged the world in search of profits and oppressed the poor at home (A, 105): the capitalist sweater of the East End was also the imperialist exploiter abroad. The view had its more unsavoury side, for it dwelt too much on the ‘Jewish’ speculators behind the Boer War and the ‘Jewish’ ministers behind the Marconi scandal which exposed the corruption of Parliament. But Chesterton’s anti-Semitism was shared by the majority of anti-imperialists, whether Liberal (Hobson was the most notorious) or socialist, and the excuses he offered differed not a whit from the excuses of socialist anti-Semites like H. M. Hyndman or Edward Carpenter.<sup>28</sup> His critique was balanced, Chesterton claimed -- ‘Jewish financial power should not dominate England,’ but neither should Rhodes and Chamberlain and Lloyd George (A, 225). His primary concern was in any case with the English common man, the Irish peasant, and the Boer farmer, linked together in victimhood and resistance.

If in its outward aspect Chesterton’s patriotism was a recrudescence of romantic nationalism, in its domestic populist expression it was a restoration of eighteenth and early nineteenth century radical patriotism,<sup>29</sup> the patriotism of Cobbett, the Chartists, and the French Revolution. The ‘idea that the good patriot is the man who feels at ease about his country .... was unknown in the little pagan republics where our European patriotism began,’

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<sup>27</sup> Chesterton, A Short History, 218.

<sup>28</sup> On Carpenter’s anti-Semitism see Vincent Geoghegan, ‘Edward Carpenter’s England Revisited,’ History of Political Thought 24.3 (Autumn 2003): 521-2. On Chesterton’s anti-Semitism see Stapleton, ‘The England of G. K. Chesterton,’ 349-50 and Canovan, G. K. Chesterton 136-40. E. B. Bax was a notable and honourable exception to this trend, see his ‘Jews, Boers and Patriots,’ Justice, October 28, 1899, 6, and H. M. Hyndman’s editorial comment on it. On Hyndman’s anti-Semitism, and the conflict between socialist jingoism and anti-imperialism within the SDF see Bill Baker, ‘The Social Democratic Federation and the Boer War,’ Our History 59 (Summer 1974): 3-16. A more recent detailed discussion of the SDF in relation to anti-semitism can be found in Graham Johnson, Social Democratic Politics in Britain, 1881-1911 (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 113-7, see also his secondary sources.

<sup>29</sup> As Hugh Cunningham defines it, see his ‘The Language of Patriotism,’ in Samuel, Patriotism 1: 57-89. See also his ‘The Conservative Party and Patriotism,’ in Colls and Dodd, Englishness 283-307. On Chesterton in relation to the political doctrine of populism see Canovan.

he asserted in his 1906 biography of Dickens. ‘It was unknown in the Middle Ages. In the eighteenth century ... a “patriot” meant a discontented man. It was opposed to the word “courtier,” which meant an upholder of present conditions .... in countries like France and Ireland ... the word “patriot” means something like a political pessimist.’<sup>30</sup> The example of those two countries was particularly important: Chesterton claimed that he always got on ‘better with revolutionists than with reformers’ (A, 247), and although he subscribed to some parts of the Liberal programme, he had ‘more personal sympathy’ with communists and ‘tyrannicide[s]’ than with ‘frigid Cambridge’ ‘snobs’ and ‘specialists’ (A, 248). He longed for ‘the days when the genuine English Radical could address the genuine English crowd’ (A, 276), and the overthrow of tyrants in the name of the people was a political reality. But though Chesterton shared few positive ideals with the frigid Cambridge snobs, his enemies and theirs were the same: the instigators of the Boer War like Milner, Chamberlain, and Rhodes, the jingoistic Yellow Press personified by the Daily Mail (A, 235), and the international ‘money-power’ of the Jewish financiers, secretive government officialdom, and the Prussianism that was eating away the English body politic. The British Empire was as bad as militarised and barbaric Turkey, and in Chesterton’s case the Liberal dislike that was conditioned by the long history of opposition to Turkish atrocities was enhanced by a crusading Christian anti-Islamicism.

The interesting thing about this catalogue is the extent to which it also overlapped with the ‘most wanted’ list of some contemporary socialists. Not the Fabians, for they were notoriously imperialistic, at one in this, as in their love of bureaucratic regimentation, with certain parts of the Establishment they wished to permeate. But many journalists and ideologues (if not always the leaders) of the Social Democratic Federation and the Independent Labour Party, of the guild socialists, and the loose grouping around Robert

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<sup>30</sup> G. K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens (1906; repr., London: Methuen, 1940), 108-9.

Blatchford's Clarion, shared Chesterton's doubts about the British Empire, and proved highly sympathetic to his friend Hilaire Belloc's critique of the Servile State. Chesterton was generous enough to acknowledge the similarities. The Fabians, he wrote, 'regard Irish nationalism as a narrow sentimentalism,' and they 'are quite right, holding their views about centralisation, to be on the side of the Big Battalions and the Big Businesses.' But the 'sentimental Socialists,' who may be illogical but are 'much nicer,' inevitably 'defend small nationalities' -- and that, in Chesterton's eyes, was a cardinal virtue (A, 208).

## **II. The anti-imperialism of William Morris**

Had Chesterton known about it, he would no doubt have pointed to an 1880 speech by William Morris -- the quintessential sentimental socialist in Engels's estimation -- entitled 'Our Country Right or Wrong.'<sup>31</sup> Though Morris was not a direct literary influence (Chesterton was more interested in his decorative work and social reformism), he was the one major writer of the previous generation to have publicly espoused the cause of patriotic anti-imperialism. It will be recalled that the first big 'outburst of jingoism' in the late-Victorian period was occasioned by the 1878 Eastern Question agitation, when Conservatives stoked anti-Russian sentiment in the wake of the Turkish Bulgarian atrocities, and -- as the old argument went -- patriotism lost its remaining radical associations to become identified with right-wing imperialism.<sup>32</sup> The second and more famous outburst was produced by the Boer War. Morris -- in 1880 not yet the author of socialist romances and utopias but a mainstream Gladstonian Liberal -- cut his political teeth on the former, Chesterton on the latter. Each formulated his version of anti-imperialist patriotism in response to the main jingoist flare-up of his time, transcending the traditional Liberal

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<sup>31</sup> William Morris, 'Our Country Right or Wrong,' ed. Florence Boos, The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies 14 (Spring 2005): 36-56. Hereafter abbreviated Q and cited parenthetically by page number. See also Ruth Kinna, 'William Morris and the Problem of Englishness,' European Journal of Political Theory 5.1 (2006): 85-99.

<sup>32</sup> See Cunningham, 'The Language of Patriotism.'

identification with internationalism and pacifism in the process. Morris's speech lacked Chesterton's paradoxical wit, but the gist of it essentially amounted to 'My mother, drunk or sober.'

'A man who says that no patriot should attack the Boer War until it is over is not worth answering intelligently,' Chesterton wrote in 1908, 'he is saying that no good son should warn his mother off a cliff until she has fallen over it.' A real friend speaks the truth, but a false patriot 'will defend the indefensible,' and will not reform.<sup>33</sup> Twenty eight years earlier Morris had come to the same conclusion: 'we are as much bound to rebuke [our country] when it is wrong, as to cheer it when it is right,' 'real patriotism bids us to be keen-eyed,' and 'true patriots ... ready to brave opprobrium by resisting the windy lies ... will insist on seeing men and things as they are, not as National Vain-glory has bidden them to be' (*Q*, 40-1). The Little Englanders of the next generation were equally aware of the price to be paid for holding adversarial principles: 'to criticise prevailing policies [was] to be unpopular, to endure eclipse.'<sup>34</sup> But they could say, with Morris, 'it is our duty who think we love our country ... to turn the light of day on every new bogie that is thrust forward' (*Q*, 38-9). 'We do not wish to see our country bring a crime to a successful issue ... we as good patriots should choose for the country we love the speedier revenge of check and foil on a wrongful cause' (*Q*, 41). As Chesterton wrote in 'A Defence of Patriotism,' 'To one who loves his fatherland ... our boasted indifference to the ethics of a national war is mere mysterious gibberism. ... What we really need for the frustration and overthrow of a deaf and raucous Jingoism is a renaissance of the love of the native land.'<sup>35</sup>

But what did love of the native land mean? In an article entitled 'Love of Country,' written a year before Chesterton's, Morris's former collaborator, the Marxist E. B. Bax,

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<sup>33</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; repr., New York: Doubleday Image Books, 2001), 68.

<sup>34</sup> Grainger, *Patriotisms* 162.

<sup>35</sup> Chesterton, 'A Defence of Patriotism,' 125-6.

differentiated between the 'love of country which was carried to the highest pitch in the city States of antiquity' and

'the love of country' which inspires the modern music-hall.... This city-patriotism of the ancient world, and, in a sense, also of the Middle Ages, I can understand. But when I am asked to feel a 'patriotic' emotion for that monstrosity, the modern centralised State ... an emotion I am on no account to feel for another similar monstrosity across the Channel ... then I confess my moral sense does not respond...<sup>36</sup> I can very well understand ... a group of kindred ... residing for generations in local proximity ... as having quite a special kind of devotion ...<sup>37</sup> Patriotism may have had some meaning in small communities .... In that amorphous modern conglomerate, the centralised individualist-capitalist national State, it is a foul imposture....<sup>38</sup>

'Patriotism is just love of native land,' Bax mocked, 'But I love other people's native lands too.... What practical line of conduct, then, does my loving my "native land" impose upon me? To help it to gain an advantage at the expense of the "native lands" of other people?'<sup>39</sup> There was nothing in any of this with which Morris, and more importantly Chesterton, would not have agreed: neither ever waxed patriotic about the modern centralised State, both harboured a soft spot for traditional small communities, and rejected the use of patriotism as an excuse for national aggression. Morris, a mere two years after the word had entered the language in its political meaning, had already warned of the clamorous 'tribe of the Jingos,' wielding 'false patriotism,' disguising dangerous 'vice ... as a virtue,' inventing ever new 'natural and hereditary enem[ies]' and 'bogie[s] to hang sham hatred and fear upon' (Q, 41). But it was hardly necessary, he pointed out, to 'manufacture enemies of England's glory' abroad 'when there [were] plenty of them' at home (Q, 55). War was waged so 'that democracy might be checked in England,' and rivals were chosen from among countries of which the public was ignorant or in which it had no interest (Q, 54). In what would become familiar Little Englander style, Morris exonerated 'wars of liberation' and those peoples 'fighting for freedom; the Greeks of the last generation, the Poles, the Montenegrins of our

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<sup>36</sup> E. B. Bax, 'Love of Country,' *Social Democrat*, September, 1900, 272-74.

<sup>37</sup> E. B. Bax, 'Jews, Boers and Patriots 2,' *Justice*, November 4, 1899, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Bax, 'Jews, Boers and Patriots 2.'

<sup>39</sup> Bax, 'Patriotism v. Socialism.'

own time,' as well as those who use 'physical force' against 'irrational' government 'by men of their own blood' (Q, 41-2). He indicted 'greed and National Vain-glory' as the chief causes of modern imperialistic war, whether over 'Suez Canal shares' or Turkish bonds, and reminded his audience that when 'some opium-selling ... or some piece of land-filching is planned [in South Africa] the pill of greed must of necessity be gilded with flimsy stuff about the advancement of civilization, the spread of the beneficent influence of the Anglo-Saxon race, and the like' (Q, 46, 51, 47). The 'blessings of civilization,' of course, were not even enjoyed by the people in London's streets, and they could not 'be worth much, when it [was] necessary to kill a man in order to make him accept' them (Q, 51). But ignorance, apathy, or the 'dread of being considered unpatriotic' made it easy to swallow the pill, and the Irish, Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbians, Zulus and Afghans suffered as a result (Q, 48-9).

This very Chestertonian analysis of imperialism was not confined to Morris's Liberal phase: a few years later, as a socialist, he condemned 'the invasion of Soudan ... prompted solely by the desire to exploit the country in the interests of the capitalists and stock-jobbers.'<sup>40</sup> His reaction to the Colonial Exhibition of 1886 deserves to be quoted in full, especially as it manifests a masterful use of irony one rarely finds in Morris's poetry and fiction:

There are, perhaps, certain exhibits of examples of the glory of the Empire which have been, I think, forgotten. We might begin at the entrance with two pyramids, *à la Timour*, of the skulls of Zulus, Arabs, Burmese, New Zealanders, etc., etc., slain in wicked resistance (sic) to the benevolence of British commerce. A specimen of the wire whips used for softening the minds of rebellious Jamacia (sic) negroes under the paternal sway of Governor Eyre might be shown, together with a selection of other such historical mementoes, from the blankets infected with small-pox sent to unfriendly tribes of Red-Skins in the latter eighteenth century down to the rope with which Louis Riel was hanged last year, for resisting a particularly gross form of land-stealing. The daily rations of an Indigo ryot and of his master under one glass case, with a certificate of the amount of nourishment in each, furnished by Professor Huxley. The glory of the British arms gained

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Florence Boos, 'Dystopian Violence: William Morris and the Nineteenth-Century Peace Movement,' *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 14 (Spring 2005): 26.

in various successful battles against barbarians and savages, the same enclosed in the right eye of a louse. The mercy of Colonists towards native populations; a strong magnifying-glass to see the same by. An allegorical picture of the emigrant's hope (a) on leaving England; (b), after six months in the Colonies. A pair of crimson plush breeches with my Lord Tennyson's 'Ode' on the opening of the Exhibition, embroidered in gold, on the seat thereof. A great many other exhibits of a similar nature could be found suitable to the exposition of the Honour, Glory, and Usefulness of the British Empire.<sup>41</sup>

Three years later, Morris drew his readers' attention to the 'English "atrocities" in Ireland, India, Jamaica, Egypt'<sup>42</sup>: all, needless to say, in the name of 'commerce.'

Fast forward a few decades, and one will find Chesterton fuming against the view represented by H. G. Wells, who thought it 'necessary, in policing the planet, to force backward peoples to open their resources to cosmopolitan commerce. In other words, he defends the only sort of war I thoroughly despise, the bullying of small states for their oil or gold...' (A, 207-8). The two Boer republics were such states, and their resistance to British 'greed' and 'vainglory' was to haunt Chesterton's imagination for the rest of his life. From the 1904 fantasy The Napoleon of Notting Hill to The Flying Inn, written on the eve of World War I, the allegory of a 'little ... commonwealth ... invaded by a more cosmopolitan empire,' and the figure of the patriot who guards his small patch against the great imperialistic powers that threaten to overwhelm it, recurred again and again in Chesterton's fiction (A, 105). The 1904 paean to local patriotism opens with a fictional ex-president of Nicaragua in search of the colours of his flag in the drab streets of London: 'Nicaragua has been conquered like Athens,' he says, 'Nicaragua has been annexed like Jerusalem .... The Yankee and the German and the brute powers of modernity have trampled it with the hoofs of oxen. But Nicaragua is not dead. Nicaragua is an idea.'<sup>43</sup> Pitted against it is the Englishman's 'cosmopolitan civilisation' which has no reverence for nationality, either its

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<sup>41</sup> William Morris, Commonweal, May 15, 1886, 49-50; reprinted in William Morris, Journalism: Contributions to Commonweal 1885-1890, ed. Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 77.

<sup>42</sup> William Morris, 'Notes on News,' Commonweal, October 19, 1889, 329; reprinted in Journalism, 617.

<sup>43</sup> G. K. Chesterton, The Napoleon of Notting Hill (1904; repr., New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1991), 17.



own or other people's, and no place for fiery 'independence' or 'heroic resistance.' But before Chesterton has done with it, the idea of Nicaragua will animate the boroughs of London itself, will 'lift the modern city into poetry.'<sup>44</sup> The moral, as Chesterton explained it in his Autobiography, is that men must realise the 'splendour of being alive' even in the meanest environments: London may be ugly, but Clapham should still be the object of a proud romantic patriotism (A, 123). Respect for other people's homelands begins with love of one's own home. In the novel, Bayswater and South Kensington do indeed become sacred patriae, hallowed with 'the blood of martyrs.'<sup>45</sup> It is not for nothing that patriotism of the Chestertonian mould has been consistently characterised as defensive: the Notting Hill fantasy literally enacts the military defence of Hamlet's eggshell, a plot which is not tomb enough to hide the slain.

### **III. E. B. Bax and internationalist socialism**

Although the overlap between certain socialist and Little Englander versions of patriotism might produce the impression that the two were interchangeable, there was certainly no such consensus at the time. 'I have defended the old Liberal notion of nationalism against the new Socialist notion of internationalism,' Chesterton summed up at the end of his life (A, 208). The many Liberal internationalists and socialist nationalists would have begged to differ, but one international socialist, who comes close enough to Chesterton on the issue of patriotism and anti-imperialism to warrant a mutual consideration, yet is distinct enough to highlight some significant ideological discrepancies, would have nodded vigorously in assent. On the face of it, Ernest Belfort Bax belonged to a completely different world. He was not a creative writer. He was a generation older than Chesterton, a co-founder, with William Morris, of the Socialist League, and a senior figure on the

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<sup>44</sup> Chesterton, Napoleon, 18, 162.

<sup>45</sup> Chesterton, Napoleon, 159.

executive of the Social Democratic Federation. A Marxist with greater links to the intellectual developments of the Continent, especially Germany, than to the native Ruskinian tradition of social criticism, he was marginalized and unusual even within the minority socialist culture. With his roots in German idealist philosophy, his monographs on Anabaptists and French revolutionary figures, and his disputes with Karl Kautsky over historical materialism, Bax hardly fitted into the more parochial English socialist scene.

But though his actual position was circumscribed, not to say isolated, his theories were global. Against the background of incipient Labour electioneering and local reform, he propounded world revolution led by the progressive states of Europe. Amid the various socialist appeals to Englishness, by everyone from H. M. Hyndman of the SDF to Robert Blatchford of the Clarion,<sup>46</sup> Bax stood firm as an avowed internationalist, a self-confessed cosmopolitan with a deep-seated contempt for most expressions of national devotion or patriotism. Even the national independence movements of the mid-nineteenth century did not elicit his sympathy.<sup>47</sup> By the light of Bax's ideals of universal class solidarity, the aims of contemporaries like Blatchford, with his slogan 'Britain for the British,' or the Fabians, with their municipal gas and water schemes, barely deserved the name of socialism: 'under cover of the name of Socialist [they] preach anti-Socialistic reaction,' he scoffed, 'be it music-hall jingoism or the doctrine that the proximate end of Socialism is municipal tramways and its highest ideal improved factory legislation....'<sup>48</sup> Blatchford was insular, his horizon bounded by concerns for the 'practical' English working man, the 'John Smith' of Clarion propaganda. But in Bax's eyes, John Smith was a flag-waving music-hall jingo, whose much-vaunted

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<sup>46</sup> On Hyndman and patriotism (as well as Morris, and the Liberal view of Englishness) see Julia Stapleton, 'Political Thought and National Identity in Britain, 1850-1950,' in History, Religion, and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750-1950, ed. Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 245-69. On Bax see Mark Bevir, 'Ernest Belfort Bax: Marxist, Idealist, and Positivist,' Journal of the History of Ideas 54.1 (January 1993): 119-35; Ruth Kinna, 'The Jacobinism and Patriotism of Ernest Belfort Bax,' History of European Ideas 30 (2004): 463-84; and for a general overview, Johnson, Social Democratic Politics, especially chapter four on 'Imperialism' and five on 'Patriotism and War.'

<sup>47</sup> E. B. Bax, 'Dead Sea Fruit,' Justice, April 20, 1895, 4.

<sup>48</sup> E. B. Bax, 'Treacherous Toleration or Faddist Fanaticism,' Social Democrat, January, 1900.

‘practical common sense’ and reprehensible nationalism made him especially backward in the cause of socialism, as compared, for instance, with his politically conscious German comrades.<sup>49</sup> Blatchford himself could hardly have lived up to Bax’s exigencies: he had virtually no conception of the vast processes of social evolution, or awareness of the struggles of socialist parties beyond England’s borders; he lacked even a rudimentary vision of the socialist transformation of foreign relations, aspiring no higher than the safety of the Empire and the maintenance of England’s competitiveness in the world market. The concept of human solidarity, ‘the unity of peoples and the brotherhood of mankind,’ would have been no more familiar to the revisionist socialist of the Blatchford type, Bax thought, than to the despised ‘Rule Britannia’ patriot.<sup>50</sup>

In all these respects Bax was Chesterton’s nemesis: he was against the nation, and Chesterton was for it, his universalism and Chesterton’s localism were incompatible as positive ideals. But one cannot with impunity claim more than that. For although Bax believed the nation-state to be a temporary political formation which would wither away in the communist future, what it would give way to was not called the Federation of Independent Communities for nothing. Bax, like Morris, looked forward to a devolution of the centralized powers of the state in favour of local administration organized on municipal and industrial lines – town communes and guilds in effect. This was not the same as Chesterton’s more individualistic ‘three acres and a cow’ (nor was Bax the kind of guild socialist that Chesterton could sympathise with), but it was certainly much closer temperamentally than a Wellsian scientific world government or a League of Nations internationalism associated with an elitist Liberal like the classics scholar Gilbert Murray. That Bax and Chesterton overlapped at least partially is betrayed by the similarity of their critiques of Fabianism and socialist jingoism, which may be gleaned from any number of

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<sup>49</sup> E. B. Bax, ‘The New International,’ *Justice*, August 19, 1893, 4 and ‘Germany Shows the Way,’ *Justice*, June 24, 1893, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Bax, ‘The New International.’

Chesterton's clashes with Shaw, from his Autobiography, or the satire of Hudge and Gudge in What's Wrong With The World.<sup>51</sup> And in the Edwardian period Bax and Chesterton moved in roughly the same circles. They both lectured to the Fabian Arts Group in 1907, and the next year their paths crossed again, in the leftist avant-garde journal The New Age.<sup>52</sup> The encounter was in fact a three-way argument between Bax, Chesterton, and Shaw, set off by Bax's negative review of Chesterton's Orthodoxy, and lasting into 1909.<sup>53</sup>

In his review, Bax called the 'modern European National State-System' that Chesterton enthused about a 'questionable boon,' saying that he much preferred the variety of Pagan antiquity, when 'every city and every district enjoyed its own religion to a large extent, its own legends and customs – in short, its own local type of colour.'<sup>54</sup> This was precisely Chesterton's ideal in The Napoleon of Notting Hill, but being engrossed in defending the Catholic Church against Bax's materialism, he failed to notice the resemblance. What is remarkable about the exchange is the extent to which the two correspondents managed to misread each other. It was as if they were incapable of penetrating beyond the commonly accepted stereotype of their opponent -- the cosmopolitan socialist materialist vs. the witty Anglo-Catholic litterateur -- to a more fundamental unity of outlook. Bax accuses Chesterton of being a decadent, a follower of Shaw and Nietzsche, of rejecting the truths of the past in favour of the latest new-fangled fashions, when as any reader of Chesterton would know, these were precisely the things (and people) against which he battled all his life. Chesterton accuses Bax of a narrowly economic view of history which ignores the role of religion, when

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<sup>51</sup> G. K. Chesterton, What's Wrong With the World (1910; repr., New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1912). For a detailed treatment of Chesterton's problem with Fabianism see Canovan, G. K. Chesterton.

<sup>52</sup> Wallace Martin, The New Age Under Orange: Chapters in English Cultural History (Oanchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1967), 22. For another consideration of Chesterton and The New Age see John D. Coates, Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis (Hull: Hull Univ. Press, 1984), 235-44.

<sup>53</sup> E. B. Bax, 'Spiritual Spoof,' The New Age, November 5, 1908, 31-2; G. K. Chesterton, 'The Solemn Spoof,' The New Age, November 26, 1908, 89-90; E. B. Bax, 'Smart-Paradox Proof,' The New Age, December 10, 1908, 130-1; G. K. Chesterton, 'The Shawbax,' The New Age, December 31, 1908, 203-4; E. B. Bax, 'The Chestershaw,' The New Age, January 14, 1909, 243-4; G. K. Chesterton, 'A Summary of Sects,' The New Age, February 25, 1909, 361-2. See also E. B. Bax, 'A Derelict of the Ages,' The New Age, April 20, 1911, 582-4.

<sup>54</sup> Bax, 'Spiritual Spoof,' 31.

this was exactly the kind of vulgar Marxism that Bax himself polemicised against in publications spanning four decades.<sup>55</sup> The highest pitch of dramatic irony was in fact reached in 1912, when Bax again referred slightly to Chesterton in the book Problems of Men, Mind, and Morals, this time with regard to the latter's 'thoroughly superficial definition' of socialism in The Daily News.<sup>56</sup> Democracy, equality, and many other 'ethical, intellectual, and social' aspects had always been essential elements of the conception, Bax wrote.<sup>57</sup> The man whom Chesterton had denigrated for acknowledging no historical causes but the economic was now sneering at Chesterton's own exclusively economic definition of socialism as going against both the historical and contemporary usages of the word.

The antagonism between Bax and Chesterton was not based solely on unfortunate misunderstandings: in many respects they really were polar opposites. Chesterton did genuinely reject Victorian 'Rationalism' of the Spencer and Huxley mould; he was no supporter of the triumphalist evolutionism of the nineteenth century; and being, over and above everything else, a Christian, he could never reconcile himself to secular Marxism. Yet as we have already seen, in their anti-imperialism as in their attitude to small communities, Bax and Chesterton were -- though they may not have known it -- broadly in agreement. From the 1880s onwards, a large proportion of Bax's articles for Justice and the Social Democrat carried an anti-imperialist charge, and excepting the time of the First World War (as was also the case with Chesterton),<sup>58</sup> Britain, as the head of the capitalist colonizing forces, received the brunt of his attacks. 'We have no sort of sympathy,' wrote Bax, 'with any racial warfare pursued outside the zone of the national territory for extraneous objects,

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<sup>55</sup> See, for instance, E. B. Bax, 'The Synthetic or the Neo-Marxist Conception of History,' Social Democrat, June, 1902, 270-274 (originally published in German in Neue Zeit, October 28, 1896); 'The Economical Theory of History,' Social Democrat, October 15, 1905, 589-597; 'Essential Socialism,' Social Democrat, August, 1911, 346-50 and October, 1911, 433-435; 'Plechanoff and the Marxian Historical Theory,' Justice, May 17, 1917, 8; H.M. Hyndman and E. B. Bax, 'Socialism, Materialism, and the War,' English Review, December, 1914, 52-69.

<sup>56</sup> E. B. Bax, Problems of Men, Mind, and Morals (London: Grant Richards, 1912), 101.

<sup>57</sup> Bax, Problems, 103.

<sup>58</sup> See E. B. Bax, 'War Reflections I,' Justice, May 6, 1915, 2 and 'Internationalism and Anti-Nationalism,' Justice, May 25, 1916, 8.

under whatsoever specious pretext .... For us Socialists no war is justifiable that is not a war against oppression from within or a war against actual invasion from without...'<sup>59</sup> Nothing controversial here, and Bax agreed with Chesterton that 'the purely defensive action against aggression from without of those living within a given area' was legitimate. He even came close to echoing The Napoleon of Notting Hill when he admitted that 'if the inhabitants of Newington were to make a raid on the inhabitants of Camberwell I should strongly champion the inhabitants of Camberwell in resisting the aggression of the Newingtonians, although I should by no means sympathise with any exalted feelings of Camberwell patriotism on the part of the Camberwellians.'<sup>60</sup> That caveat was the place where Bax parted ways with Chesterton, for whatever concessions he may have allowed to the defensive Little England mentality, Bax refused to semantically uncouple 'Nationalism, Patriotism, Imperialism,' 'my-country-right-or-wrong,' 'England above all,' 'or by whatever other name the idea of own-race exclusiveness and other-race hatred may be called.'<sup>61</sup>

In The Napoleon of Notting Hill patriotism is condemned as soon as it turns aggressive and grasping, as soon as it turns into imperialism in other words, but the two are assumed to be separate to begin with. As Chesterton's fanatic hero proclaims: 'The glory of Notting Hill [is] in having achieved its independence .... Notting Hill is a nation. Why should it condescend to be a mere Empire? ... Cannot you be content with that destiny which was enough for Athens, which was enough for Nazareth? ... So has the soul of Notting Hill gone forth and made men realise what it is to live in a city.'<sup>62</sup> If it attacks other cities it deserves to be defeated. As has been seen, Bax was capable of understanding this type of rhetoric, but he would not admit its place in the modern world: 'In ancient times patriotism applied to a definite circumscribed area and population – the city; in mediaeval time similarly

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<sup>59</sup> E. B. Bax, 'National 'Ideals' and the Pest of 'Patriotism', *Justice*, July 16, 1904, 4. Italics in original.

<sup>60</sup> E. B. Bax, 'Internationalism, Nationalism and Patriotism,' *Justice*, January 6, 1916, 2.

<sup>61</sup> E. B. Bax, 'The New Religion of the Possessing Classes,' *Justice*, April 9, 1914, 2.

<sup>62</sup> Chesterton, Napoleon, 147-8.

to the township... [But] the devotion to the modern State, is a product of capitalism... and the latest form of the sentiment, Imperialism, is simply a product of the Great Industry in search of markets....'<sup>63</sup> Chestertonian patriotism, in other words, had been a thing appropriate to its stage of development, but it was no longer viable for the West in the twentieth century: historical evolution had left it behind and its vocabulary had been co-opted by conservative propaganda. The notion was out of date, and instead of attempting to resurrect it for contemporary use or to wrest it from the grip of reactionary elements, as patriotic Liberals and socialists both tried to do, it was better to bury it entirely.<sup>64</sup> Bax conceded that

Up till quite recently to be a patriot meant to be opposed to the monarch and governing classes of your country in the interests of the people of your country. The nearest approach to its current meaning was that of being zealous in defending the soil of your country against a foreign invader, just as the Boers are doing now.... [But] The new 'patriotism,' otherwise called 'jingoism'... dates in its full fruition from the period of the struggle of the capitalist classes of the different European states over the division of the world market.... of which modern Imperialism is the political expression .... in conclusion a word of protest against any attempt to revive the word 'patriotism,' or to refurbish it for democratic purposes.... In its old sense the word has had its day. It is a bad word, at best, of necessity carrying with it the suggestion of race exclusiveness, even though this may be kept in the background, while at its worst it implies a glorification of national infamy. Social-Democrats want no 'true patriotism,' whatever that may mean. They want to do away with Patriotism altogether and substitute in its place the 'Internationalism' of the class-conscious proletariat.<sup>65</sup>

This was as direct a blow as possible at the very heart of the Little England project. Bax, in effect, anticipated Hugh Cunningham's argument that from the 1870s one could no longer disengage patriotism from its association with conservative militarism,<sup>66</sup> and that those who tried to revive a patriotism of the Left -- Hyndman and Blatchford most notoriously -- failed to escape the slide into chauvinism. Bax may almost have been predicting Chesterton's

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<sup>63</sup> Bax, 'Jews, Boers and Patriots 2.'

<sup>64</sup> See Julia Stapleton, 'Citizenship vs. Patriotism,' 156: 'For progressive liberals such as L. T. Hobhouse, imperialism had corrupted patriotism by transforming legitimate pride in national independence into chauvinism and aggrandizement.' Edward Carpenter had similar thoughts: on the one hand, like Morris and Chesterton, he distinguished between 'true' and 'false' patriotism, on the other, patriotism was too much tainted with imperialism and was no longer a useful concept, it had to give way to universalist humanism. See Geoghegan, 'Edward Carpenter's England' 515-21.

<sup>65</sup> E. B. Bax, 'Patriotism,' *Justice*, May 1, 1901, 6.

<sup>66</sup> Cunningham, 'The Language of Patriotism,' 81.

propaganda activities during World War I when he wrote: ‘The distinction between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” nationalism is in practice impossible of definition .... The man whose nationalist tendencies are strong in a crisis invariably drifts into the attitude “my country right or wrong”’.<sup>67</sup>

Bax refused to allow the possibility that one could be anti-imperial and anti-internationalist at the same time. His view acknowledged only one of Cunningham’s two types of anti-imperialism: not the kind which inherited the pacifism of the earlier radicals and ‘was most dramatically in evidence’ during the Boer War, but the socialist alternative which rejected the claims of the nation entirely in favour of international working class solidarity. But Chesterton fitted neither description and knew it (A, 105), and while Bax was a good representative of the latter, he was also an exception, for even among socialists who opposed the war internationalists were a minority.<sup>68</sup> The majority couched their opposition in terms of a patriotism that was virtually indistinguishable from Chesterton’s. All the hallmarks were there: the division between true and false patriotism -- the pro-Boer being a symbol of the former and the vainglorious jingo of the latter; the simplistic idealisation of the Boers’ agrarian pre-capitalist lifestyle, so similar to a lost English past and a hoped-for English future; their heroic fight ‘for freedom and national independence’ against the oligarchy of cosmopolitan Jewish financiers and owners of the jingo press<sup>69</sup>; and the sacrifice of English liberties for the profit of men with foreign names.<sup>70</sup> On most of these themes it would have been impossible to tell Edward Carpenter, J. B. Glasier, Keir Hardie, and Chesterton apart. Given the juxtaposition between ‘British capitalist civilisation and Boer peasant culture,’ ‘siding with the English or with the Boers became synonymous with relating positively or

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<sup>67</sup> E. B. Bax, ‘Patriotism, Militarism and Ethics,’ Justice, July 18, 1907, 4-5.

<sup>68</sup> The divisions within socialist opinion with regard to the Boer War are minutely catalogued in Ward’s chapter on ‘The Left, England and an Imperial War’ in Red Flag and Union Jack 59-75.

<sup>69</sup> Ward, Red Flag and Union Jack 66.

<sup>70</sup> A motif that would continue to be of use throughout the Edwardian debate on militarism.



negatively to modernity and capitalist progress.’<sup>71</sup> The British in this case were their own enemies, it was the Boers who represented the true English virtues. Edward Carpenter’s contrast between the Boer farmer idyll and ‘the bloodless, soulless rule of Companies,’ in a Johannesburg ‘hell full of Jews, financiers, [and] greedy speculators’ could have served as a fitting metaphor for Chesterton’s contrast between the Distributist peasant ideal and the reality of modern capitalism within England itself.<sup>72</sup>

It was only Ernest Belfort Bax who abjured what Preben Kaarsholm has called ‘populist, nationalist-romantic anti-capitalism’ in favour of a pure socialist internationalism -- denying all patriotism, true or false, supporting the Boers’ resistance not because they were engaged in a struggle for national independence, but because of their place in the Marxist scheme of social evolution. Of course, Bax’s thought did not abide in splendid isolation: he had like-minded colleagues in the SDF, his economic analysis of imperialism was very similar to Hobson’s, and he delighted in setting up good farmer/bad capitalist dichotomies as much as the next man. But as if anticipating that his pro-Boerism could be mistaken for romantic nationalism, Bax offered the following disclaimer:

it may be said, sympathy with the Boers means sympathy with an ‘oppressed nationality’ as such which is, after all, a patriotic issue from the oppressed nationality’s standpoint.... [But] if we look deeper we shall find the true kernel of the matter to lie in the effort of a small people living in an earlier economic stage of society to resist the sudden and violent invasion of British and international capitalism in its latest forms. Similarly the Irish question, although at first sight mere patriotism, in reality concealed an important issue of economic justice....<sup>73</sup>

Bax cast the Boer War in terms of a conflict between different stages of socio-economic development.<sup>74</sup> He naturally supported the pre-capitalist peasant republic against the

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<sup>71</sup> Preben Kaarsholm, ‘Pro-Boers,’ in Samuel, *Patriotism* 1: 112, 110.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Kaarsholm, ‘Pro-Boers’ 1: 113.

<sup>73</sup> Bax, ‘Jews, Boers and Patriots 2,’ 6. He expressed this in virtually the same form thirteen years later in ‘Nationalities and Individuals,’ *British Socialist*, November 15, 1912, 481-485.

<sup>74</sup> See also Bax, ‘Patriotism, Militarism and Ethics.’

international finance of the British Empire, but by the same token, he supported the native black population against the Boers themselves.

[The] governing classes will stand in together against the barbarian just as they will against the proletarian. Frenchman will assist Italian, Boer, Britisher when it is a question of the 'nigger' asserting his claim to independence, and to live his own life in peace and freedom, just as German assisted Frenchman at the time of the Commune, when it was a question of the workman asserting his claim to independence.<sup>75</sup>

If the question were one of white man against black, he proclaimed, he would undoubtedly 'be with the native against both Boer and Briton alike.'<sup>76</sup> In this he was not alone.

Hyndman, despite being on the opposite side of the fence as regards the relative merits of the British and the Boers, also called the war 'a struggle between two burglars .... The future of Africa is, I believe, to the black man; and if I am going to agitate for the independence of anybody, it is for the independence of the splendid native tribes who are being crushed by the Boers and ourselves together.'<sup>77</sup> And although William Morris did not live to see the conflict, his last speech at the Annual New Year's Meeting of the SDF in 1896 gave an adequate indication of what his opinion would have been. According to Hyndman, 'He thought it was a case of a pack of thieves quarrelling about their booty. The Boers had stolen their land from the people it had belonged to; people had come in to help them to develop their stolen property and now wanted to steal it themselves.'<sup>78</sup>

Chesterton, by contrast, was not one to mar the heroic fairy-tale picture of Jack vs. the Giant by introducing uncomfortable facts like the presence of black slave labour on the Boer farms. Much as he may have disliked 'greater England,' the coloured populations of the colonies were low on his scale of interests. Among his arguments against the Boer War, British self-confidence and Jewish names are much more noticeable than any awareness of

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<sup>75</sup> E. B. Bax, 'The True Aims of 'Imperial Extension' and 'Colonial Enterprise', *Justice*, May 1, 1896, 7-8.

<sup>76</sup> Bax, 'Jews, Boers and Patriots.'

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack* 74.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in H. M. Hyndman, *The Record of an Adventurous Life* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1911), 364.

both sides' appalling treatment of the natives, and in the essay in 'Defence of Patriotism' written at the height of the war, the Zulus only enter as a bit of comic relief. Chesterton's attention was focused elsewhere: on the unsuitability of Empire as an object of a rooted patriotism, for instance, or on the evils of cosmopolitanism.<sup>79</sup> As a rationale for refraining from further imperial exploits, this was a far cry from Bax's anthropologic analogies between barbarians and proletarians making 'common cause' to fight 'capitalist civilisation' in the name of pre- and post-capitalistic forms of society.<sup>80</sup> The 'backward' nations of Africa undergoing colonization still occupied the stage of savagery or barbarism – in the sense given to those words by the American anthropologist Lewis Morgan, whose evolutionary scheme of development greatly influenced Bax's thinking. They had the right to follow through their own process of social development via self-government,<sup>81</sup> but Britain and the other Western powers hoped by the exploitation of the new markets, resources, and cheap labour acquired by the opening up of the African continent to prolong the existence of their dying capitalist system.<sup>82</sup> Any mention of British activity in Africa was always liable to elicit bitter condemnatory outbursts, and even a perceptible shift in Bax's vocabulary: the Anglo-Saxon colonizers were 'scurvy scum,' riff-raff, ruffians, thieves, marauders, 'bestial murder[ers] of poor defenceless blacks.'<sup>83</sup> The 'white man's burden' was a euphemism for slavery. More than once Bax called for the arming of native populations to enable them to resist the depredations of the capitalist: a type of Marxist anti-colonialism which would become very relevant by the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> See G. K. Chesterton's chapter 'On Mr. Rudyard Kipling and Making the World Small,' in *Heretics* (1905; repr., Sandy, UT: Quiet Vision Publishing, 2003), 18.

<sup>80</sup> Bax, 'The True Aims of 'Imperial Extension'.'

<sup>81</sup> E. B. Bax, 'Cult of Abstraction,' *Justice*, October 19, 1895, 4; see also 'The International Congress and Colonial Policy,' *Justice*, September 14, 1907, 3.

<sup>82</sup> See E. B. Bax's leading article on 'Africa,' *Commonweal*, July 28, 1888, 3. This analysis was not unique to Bax: James Conolly was another Marxist who used it.

<sup>83</sup> E. B. Bax, 'South Africa Again,' *Justice*, June 27, 1896, 4.

<sup>84</sup> Bax, 'The True Aims of 'Imperial Extension': socialists could 'do good service in the organisation of native resistance in drilling, and in teaching the effective use of firearms.'

And what was Chesterton's remedy for the effects of jingoism? An education in English literature:

We are the only people in the world who are not taught in childhood our own literature and our own history.... all this vast heritage of intellectual glory is kept from our schoolboys like a heresy; and they are left to live and die in the dull and infantile type of patriotism which they learnt from a box of tin soldiers.... while a unifying vision of patriotism can ennoble bands of brutal savages or dingy burghers, and be the best thing in their lives, we ... have a patriotism that is the worst thing in ours....<sup>85</sup>

Chesterton goes on to appeal for a national education like that possessed by France and Germany, echoing the arguments of the 1860s Liberals who battled against the ascendancy of the classics, rather than those of his imperialist contemporaries like Lord Milner.<sup>86</sup> Imparting a bit of culture to the mafficking mobs or supplying the African natives with firearms? Here were two very different proposals for dealing with imperialism, but the comparison with Bax is not meant to be disparaging to Chesterton. It will be recalled that the focus of the Little Englanders was as much domestic as foreign, and if Bax's internationalism and aversion to the 'vulgar, swaggering brag' and 'cad,'<sup>87</sup> the 'personally revolting,' 'boozeey, God-Save-the-Queen and Rule Britannia bawling mafficker,'<sup>88</sup> made him more perceptive in external matters, it also blinded him to the humanity of that being Chesterton called the English common man. Ironically enough, it was the patriot rather than the socialist who showed more sensitivity to the injustices perpetrated by 'capitalist civilisation' against the English 'native.' Chesterton's populism may not have opened his eyes to the true nature of colonial oppression, but it led him unerringly to side with the trade unions both during the industrial unrest that preceded the First World War and the General Strike of 1926.

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<sup>85</sup> Chesterton, 'A Defence of Patriotism,' 128, 130-1.

<sup>86</sup> On the Edwardian imperialist campaign for a 'national' education see Stephen Heathorn, For Home, Country, and Race: Constructing Gender, Class, and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1880-1914 (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2000); Grainger, Patriotisms; Porter, The Absent-Minded Imperialists. On the Victorian Liberal case for it see F. W. Farrar, ed., Essays on a Liberal Education (London: Macmillan and Co., 1867). 'National' meant very different things in the two contexts.

<sup>87</sup> Bax, 'Jews, Boers and Patriots 2.'

<sup>88</sup> Bax, 'Love of Country.'

#### IV. Chesterton today: The parochial straw man

There is much that is worrying about Chesterton's interpretation of patriotism: its partial exoneration of fanaticism, its approval of religious crusades, even if accompanied by an absolute rejection of wars for territory and resources. 'The only sort of war that I really defend,' Chesterton wrote in his Autobiography, is 'a war of civilisations and religions, to determine the moral destiny of mankind' (A, 207-8). This may justifiably sound alarm bells for the twenty-first century reader, but oddly enough, it is not Chesterton's recurrent and determined anti-Islamicism that attracts modern critics' attention: if his views are still considered relevant enough to be attacked, it is over their philistine, 'thoroughly defensive definition of Englishness - one that was formulated in bitter awareness that the world was actually moving in the opposite direction.'<sup>89</sup> Patrick Wright has argued that Chesterton's 'anti-imperialism was less a critical engagement with the British empire, than an act of retreat and even denial. Though presented as a cosmic locale, Chesterton's England was actually also a last ditch, no sooner occupied than it had to be defended against all sorts of encroaching modern forces.'

This is not an entirely unfair assessment. In What's Wrong With The World, Chesterton effectively equated all of commercial civilisation with imperialism: the 'whole brutal business of bossing and sacking, "too old at forty" and all the rest of the filth' was 'Ceasarism,' despotism, 'un-English,' and the opposite of democracy. To score a polemical point he was willing to claim that 'Certainly, it would be far better to go back to village communes, if they really are communes.... Certainly, we would sacrifice all our wires, wheels, systems, specialties, physical science and frenzied finance for one half-hour of

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<sup>89</sup> Patrick Wright, 'Last Orders,' The Guardian Review, April 9, 2005. Wright is the author of On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain (London: Verso, 1985) and numerous other books on English national culture.

happiness such as has often come to us with comrades in a common tavern.’<sup>90</sup> The romantic anti-capitalism of a Ruskin or a Morris is recognisable at a glance, but there is hardly anything sinister in this expression of outrage at the soul-destroying conditions of industrial society. But, Wright insists, Chestertonian patriotism, not content with prejudiced ‘muttering’ ‘over real ale in unmodernised pubs,’ could become ‘militant and vicious.’ ‘In polarising the past from the present, it [could] only produce a kippered idea of England in which the very thought of difference or change is instantly identified with degeneration, corruption and death.’ Unfortunately, in attempting to translate Chesterton for a contemporary audience more familiar with the British National Party than with Distributism, Wright seems to have mixed up his patriotisms. Just as the Marxist revolutionary William Morris quickly became confounded in the popular imagination with garden-suburb arty-craftiness, and, in F. R. Leavis’s astonishingly misguided interpretation, folk-dancing and pubs,<sup>91</sup> so Chesterton dwindled to be the patron saint of intolerant and fascistic Catholic beer-drinkers.<sup>92</sup> George Orwell, despite his enormous debt to the Chestertonian kind of radical patriotism, was in part responsible for entrenching this view (he also swallowed the conservative Morris myth hook, line, and sinker). It is a view that has persisted to this day.

Chesterton’s ‘comrades in a common tavern,’ however, are not ‘Anglo-Saxon men seated in an unrenovated pub: slow but steadfast, unschooled but instinctively wise,’ as Wright would have it. Chesterton was a committed enemy of the Anglo-Saxon idea: ‘the more clearly we see the world divided into Saxons and non-Saxons, into our splendid selves and the rest, the more certain we may be that we are slowly and quietly going mad,’ he wrote. ‘The more clear become the colours and facts of Anglo-Saxon superiority, the more surely

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<sup>90</sup> Chesterton, *What’s Wrong*, 136-7.

<sup>91</sup> See Peter Faulkner, ‘William Morris and the *Scrutiny* Tradition,’ *The Journal of William Morris Studies* 16.4 (Summer 2006): 27-46.

<sup>92</sup> For a nuanced assessment of Chesterton’s relation to fascism see Canovan, *G. K. Chesterton* 126-45.

we may know we are in a dream.’<sup>93</sup> In Orthodoxy he called Anglo-Saxonism ‘utter unreason,’<sup>94</sup> in his Autobiography he poured scorn on the ethnological ‘tosh’ of the Teutonic race, on the historiographical axiom that everything happened ‘solely that [it] might make Anglo-Saxons yet more Anglo-Saxon, in the far-off hope of their becoming Anglo-American’ (A, 120, 283). This was a dig not only at the Victorian Teutonist Edward Freeman’s school of history but at the Dilke or Rhodes-style Greater Britain worship of Anglo-Saxondom, which included the United States in its scheme for the domination of the world.<sup>95</sup> Whenever Chesterton referred to the white settler colonies, in which he included the United States, he could not resist a note of contempt.<sup>96</sup>

In fact, if Chesterton had been born early enough to have participated in the Victorian feud between the Romanists and the Teutonists, he would have sided wholeheartedly with the former. His Short History of England not only continually sings the praises of Roman Britain, but actually attacks the ‘racial theories’ of the ‘scientific historians’ head on.<sup>97</sup> He only references J. R. Green -- the author of the popular Short History of the English People (1874) -- directly, but his targets include the whole Teutonic school of the mid and late nineteenth century and the innumerable textbooks that disseminated the idea of Anglo-Saxon difference and superiority up to the First World War. All those distinctions between ‘the Celts, the Teutons and the Latins’ that so preoccupied historians and writers from Kingsley to Arnold, are to Chesterton meaningless and unfounded,<sup>98</sup> primarily because, as he observes, there is no historical basis for concluding that racial considerations were any kind of cause or motive force until modern times. They certainly had no place in the Roman

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<sup>93</sup> Chesterton, Charles Dickens, 109.

<sup>94</sup> Chesterton, Orthodoxy, 69.

<sup>95</sup> Lord Milner was another Anglo-Saxon supremacist associated with imperial federation. For both Victorian Teutonism and turn-of-the-century imperial federalism see Mandler, English National Character.

<sup>96</sup> Chesterton, What’s Wrong, 103-4; see also ‘The Fallacy of the Young Nation,’ in Heretics, and ‘A Defence of Patriotism,’ 126.

<sup>97</sup> Chesterton, A Short History, 31.

<sup>98</sup> Chesterton, A Short History, 32.

Empire or in the Dark Ages which followed it. The Teutons, for all intents and purposes, did not exist until ‘a few years ago’ when nationalist historians fond of building elaborate superstructures on woefully inadequate documentary evidence invented ‘the world-old Teutonic Race.’<sup>99</sup> Chesterton is especially hard on Green’s idealisation of the Teutons, and goes so far as to claim that the Germanic extermination of the Celts may never have taken place. The fact that no Dark Age commentator took any notice of questions of race or ethnology indicated, for Chesterton, that they had no conception of them. ‘Racial fatalism,’ resulting in ‘racial wars,’<sup>100</sup> the kind of patriotism associated with Anglo-Saxon predominance -- the patriotism of Rhodes and Conan Doyle -- was to Chesterton absolutely abhorrent. This rarely discussed dimension of his thought actually brought him very close to the ideals of E. B. Bax, who wrote many years earlier that ‘Tall talk about the “Anglo-Saxon race,” or “the great democracies of English-speaking peoples, in union with the more ancient democracy of England” ... can but disgust the socialist.’<sup>101</sup> It disgusted Chesterton as well. His anti-Teutonism was rooted not, of course, in the idea of international socialism, but of a pan-European Christendom, a Europe-wide pre-Reformation civilisation or culture which had allowed for endless local variety, and of which England had been a part.<sup>102</sup>

Returning, however, to Wright’s imputations of traditional public house parochialism, one may also note that Chesterton’s favoured locales in his fiction and essays -- Clapham, Kensington, Notting Hill, Bedford Park -- were urban, and his metaphors more often than not London-based. ‘What was called my medievalism,’ he explained, ‘was simply that I was very much interested in the historic meaning of Clapham Common. What was called my dislike of Imperialism was a dislike of making England an Empire, in the sense of something more like Clapham Junction’ (A, 124). The restaurants of Soho actually feature more

<sup>99</sup> Chesterton, A Short History, 33, 200.

<sup>100</sup> Chesterton, A Short History, 160.

<sup>101</sup> E. B. Bax, ‘Imperialism vs. Socialism,’ Commonweal, February, 1885, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Chesterton, A Short History, 14: ‘The first half of English history has been made quite unmeaning in the schools by the attempt to tell it without reference to the corporate Christendom in which it took part and pride.’



frequently in his fiction than country inns, and the Underground, the omnibus, and the motorcar appear as often and are portrayed in as positive a light as the ‘rolling English road.’ Though he was no Wells, Chesterton did enjoy some technical aspects of modernity that would have horrified the stereotypical luddite; what he censured was not change and difference, but relativism and exploitation. It should not be forgotten that Chesterton was a journalist in twentieth-century Fleet Street, accustomed to using the mass press as a pulpit, and no one was better placed to analyse and deplore the abuses of the tabloids and the growing penetration of big business methods (A, 113).<sup>103</sup> As he said with regard to the publications of Harmsworth and Pearson: ‘for purposes of real public opinion the press is now a mere plutocratic oligarchy.’<sup>104</sup> One may well ask what was so anti-modern about the opinion that Parliament was ‘secret government by the rich,’ and democracy a ‘legal fiction’ to cover the reality of ‘centralised Capitalist States’ and global finance (A, 194-5). Chesterton’s internationalist socialist contemporaries would have said the same. Few would argue, even now, that political scandals conclude, ‘as such affairs always conclude in modern England, with a formal verdict and a white-washing committee.’ ‘A parliamentary Commission [is] appointed and report[s] that everything [is] very nice; a Minority Report [is] issued which report[s] that some things [are] not quite so nice; and political life (if you can call it life) [goes] on as before’ (A, 192). It is difficult to see such statements as evidence of retreat or denial.

Chesterton may have idealised the common sense and ‘incorruptible kindliness’ of the English, but he preferred the revolutionism of the Irish or the French, and the typical heroes of his fiction are fiery, often foreign rebels in fantastic uniforms. The English national character was, in fact, too complacent for his tastes: ‘you march to Trafalgar Square

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<sup>103</sup> For Chesterton’s journalistic context see Coates, ‘The Journalistic Arena,’ in Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis 46-84 and *passim*.

<sup>104</sup> Chesterton, ‘The Mildness of the Yellow Press,’ in Heretics, 49.

to rid yourself of your temper; not to rid yourself of your tyrant.’<sup>105</sup> ‘Perhaps the English people, if you gave it beer enough, would accept even Eugenics.’<sup>106</sup> But a revolution of the English poor, if it happened, would be a wonderful thing, and when a ‘parochial’ character on the lines of Kipling’s Old Hobden or Edward Thomas’s Lob does make an appearance in Chesterton’s fiction, it is in an explicitly radical populist context. In The Flying Inn, ‘a faint renewal of that laughter that has slept since the Middle Ages’ appears on the ‘withered face’ of old man Marne, ‘who might have been a thousand years old’ -- but only because he has just seen the landlord’s agent made a fool of.<sup>107</sup> The comic novel ends with a revolt, the people of England fight back, for the first time in centuries. They are only expressing what Chesterton called in Orthodoxy ‘cosmic patriotism’: being devoted to a thing enough to revolutionize it, to ‘smash the whole universe for the sake of itself.’<sup>108</sup> Here at last, in a typical Chestertonian paradox, the universal and the local are reconciled in the act of resistance.

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<sup>105</sup> Chesterton, Inn, 189.

<sup>106</sup> G. K. Chesterton, ‘Why I Am Not a Socialist,’ The New Age, January 4, 1908, 190. Chesterton mounted an outspoken campaign against eugenics when the idea was at the height of its popularity, see, for instance, his Eugenics and Other Evils (London: Cassell, 1922).

<sup>107</sup> Chesterton, Inn, 62, 54.

<sup>108</sup> Chesterton, Orthodoxy, 71.